

PART FOUR

The Composer

Some parts of classical composition are still closed to improvisation and it is likely that they will always remain closed. But there are areas into which, in recent years, improvisation has been re-introduced. Mainly this has been through a broadening of the concept and role of notation. In the past, the main means by which improvisation was restricted and removed was through the development of notation, a process here described by Jacques Charpentier:— 'When, at the end of the Middle Ages, the Occident attempted to notate musical discourse, it was actually only a sort of shorthand to guide an accomplished performer, who was otherwise a musician of oral and traditional training. These graphic signs were sufficiently imprecise to be read only by an expert performer and sufficiently precise to help him find his place if, by mishap, he had a slip of memory. Consequently, as we see, it was not a question of precise notation but rather a mnemonic device in written symbols. Later on, the appearance of the musical staff on the one hand, and

symbols of time duration on the other, made it possible to move to a real notation which reflects with exactitude the whole of musical material presented in this manner. At this point in history it does not seem as if the contemporaries of that time fully realised the consequences of their discovery. For in actual fact, from that moment on, a musical work was no longer strictly musical; it existed outside itself, so to speak, in the form of an object to which a name was given: the score. The score very soon ceased to be the mere perpetuator of a tradition, to become the instrument of elaboration of the musical work itself. Consequently the analytical qualities of musical discourse took precedence in the course of centuries over its qualities of synthesis and the musical work ceased to be, little by little, the expression of an experienced psycho-physiological continuum — on the spot and at the moment it is experienced; and instead became what is more and more prevalent today in the Occident — that is a wilful, formal and explicative construction which finds in itself alone its substance and its justification.'

The reaction in recent times to the stranglehold that notation came to have on the music came partly through an increase in the possibilities for the performer to affect not only the course but also the creation of the music. Some of these developments, while removing some degree of control from the composer, have not necessarily introduced the possibility of improvisation. But there are composers who have deliberately turned towards improvisation. Earle Brown, the American composer, was possibly the first to move in this direction. His notation is here described by Morton Feldman:— 'His "time notation", in fact, has become part of modern day compositional usage. The sound is placed in its approximate visual relationship to that which surrounds it. Time is not indicated mechanistically, as with rhythm. It is articulated for the performer but not interpreted. The effect is twofold.

When the performer is made more intensely aware of time, he also becomes more intensely aware of the action or sound he is about to play. The result is a heightened spontaneity which only performance itself can convey. Brown's notation, in fact, is geared to counteract just this discrepancy between the written page and the realities of performance.'

His 'time notation', however, was only one reflection of Earle Brown's interest in improvisation.

He described to me how — *In 1952 when I was experimenting with*

open form and aspects of improvisation, my influences to do that were primarily from the American sculptor Alexander Calder and the mobiles, which are transforming works of art, I mean they have indigenous transformational factors in their construction, and this seemed to me to be just beautiful. As you walk into a museum and you look at a mobile you see a configuration that's moving very subtly. You walk in the same building the next day and it's a different configuration, yet it's the same piece, the same work by Calder. It took me a couple of years to figure out how to go about it musically. I thought that it would be fantastic to have a piece of music which would have a basic character always, but by virtue of aspects of improvisation or notational flexibility, the piece could take on subtly different kinds of character.

Indeterminate composition, which might be described as any kind of composition in which the composer deliberately relinquishes control of any element of the composition, seems to be concerned with utilising two quite different concepts; aleatoric and improvisation. I asked Earle Brown what, for him, was the difference between them.

Well, aleatory is a word that Boulez used in an article a long time ago which means throwing of dice and so forth. It's really chance, and I am vehemently against considering improvisation as chance music . . . Cage was literally flipping coins to decide which sound event was to follow which sound event and that was to remove his choice, his sense of choice, and it was also not to allow the musician to have any choice either, and I was not interested in that at all. At the same time he was organising strictly and fixedly by chance processes, I was working with improvisational forms.

In the Universal Edition (No. 15306) of his String Quartet score (1965), Earle Brown writes:

I have fixed the overall form but have left areas of flexibility within the inner structures.

And among the directions for performance is:

The relative pitch duration and rhythm are indicated by the graphics, and the instrumental techniques are given — only the precise 'pitches' are left to the discretion of the performers. (This has been aptly described as an 'action notation'; the actual pitches sounded are a function of accurately performing what has been

given.) All four parts are included in each part so that an eye-ear ensemble is possible.

More radically his instructions for the last, the 'open form' section of the work are:

There are 8 or 10 events for each musician, separated from one another by vertical dotted lines. Each musician may play any of his events at any time, in any order and at any speed. In some cases the technique, the loudness and/or the rhythm may be 'free' for the individual musician to determine; where these elements are given they must be observed. All of the materials in these events have appeared previously in the work, but not necessarily in the part in which they appear in this section. This section is, in effect, a free coda, to be assembled spontaneously by the quartet. The section includes very articulate materials (all parameters described), very inarticulate materials, 'below-bridge' sounds, and sustained sounds. These can be spontaneously assembled in any sequence and position; but through sensitive ensemble listening I believe that spontaneous 'rational' continuities of techniques will arise. So that, for instance, a statistical area of inarticulate sounds moving into a 'below-bridge' area, into an area of primarily articulate material . . . or any other sequence of statistical similarities of texture and style is created. I prefer that such 'ordering' should come about in this intuitive-conscious manner spontaneously during each performance. A complete pre-performance ordering of these materials — which I could very well arrange myself — would eliminate the possibility of the intense, immediate communication of ensemble collaboration which is an extremely important aspect of 'music-making' as I see it.

Having passed over some control to the musicians, how much did Earle Brown want to retain? I quoted an instruction from the score of the Quartet, 'Play events between dotted lines in any order independently, conscious of ensemble.' There are a number of possible interpretations of 'conscious of ensemble', aren't there? I can think of musicians who are only happy in an ensemble they dominate.

I know. That's one of the ego problems that you are confronted with in some situations, but basically, you know, it's always a collaborative thing of give and take, and what I expect is goodwill. I got to doing that quartet thing after a great deal of experience. In 1952 I went to the extreme of very, very tenuous vague suggestions of

actions — the next stop beyond that would have been a blank page, but we all have blank pages anyway, and I don't need to give anybody a blank page. On the other hand, within the same year, 1952, I'd done absolutely strict, totally organised, serial music. And so I was seeing from both directions, from the extremes, the degrees of flexibility that I could dictate through notation, and the degrees of control I could imply through very vague indications. And I also had come up as a jazz musician — and also the influence of Alexander Calder and Jackson Pollock's paintings Jackson was sort of a wild guy and he was a very brilliant man and felt this kind of intensity in his own spontaneity and it occurred to me that Jackson was almost performing his paintings — and so all of these things came together in 1951 and '52 for me and I produced this thing which I called *Experiments in Notation, Performance Process*, — what the human mind does when it is confronted with graphic stimuli or literal notation. These qualities of control interested me.

The main difference that occurs to me between your methods and Jackson Pollock's is that you are using other people's sensibilities, other people's spontaneity, and, of course, Jackson Pollock, his involvement was direct. You are accepting the effect of the situation on other people's sensibilities.

Yes, but you see it's my responsibility to try and condition their sensibility involvement. I used to envy painters very much because they had their work in their hands, so to speak. They could see it. When you've done it, it's in its real form. Writing music you don't have the real thing. All you have are symbols. So, in any case, the writing of music involves an aspect of projection, I would say, projecting your imagination into a situation you are not going to be present in, and in that sense it's not so strange for me to try to project one stage further, which is to project the conditions that I hope, with good will, the musicians will enter into.

So the responsibility of the performers is still entirely to the composer — just as if they were going to play a fully notated piece?

I think so . . . but what I say is that I am extending an invitation to the musicians to take part with me.

Do you have difficulties with improvisors who have developed their playing within one particular style? I mean if you gave a piece of graphic notation to one clarinet player it might come out sounding like New Orleans jazz and the same part played by another

clarinet player might sound like Mozart.

Yes, I'm not really sure I'm wanting to produce stylistic collisions . . . You see, it is somewhat my responsibility to create conditions which, in a certain sense, won't be violated stylistically. For instance, if there's somebody who is very good at improvising in the style of Bach, or in the baroque period, very often I suggest something verbally. Like, I ask for erratic, jagged rhythms, so that he would not make sequences of 8th notes.

Well possibly there's some advantage then in having a musician who doesn't have a stylistic commitment? Who possibly doesn't improvise?

Improvising takes a certain degree of self-confidence and a lot of classical musicians don't have that self-confidence. But the people for whom I write, leading groups who are interested in avant garde music, already have approached that, they've experienced it, they've heard other people do it and they are aware of those problems. In 1952 I was convinced that music, our music, was going to move in a certain way which would be more inclusive of flexibility, let us say, and it has moved in that direction. In the string quartet there is an improvised ending but they have certain controls in there, they are given a repertoire of material. If the Budapest String Quartet, say, were to play the end of my quartet with those materials already mentioned I think that they would do it very well, if it interested them, but, if I had not written those materials, I would probably be dissatisfied with the results. They would start quoting the repertoire they know best and I've always tried to provoke the musician to go beyond his habits.

I suppose all composition in the past has produced the performer it needs and I suppose there are now more musicians who give you the type of interpretation you want?

Oh yes, it's progressively easier and easier for me to get good performances.

* * * * *

One of the things that has come up repeatedly with people who've spoken about their improvisation is the term *duende*. Paco Peña, the flamenco guitar player, described how there are times when the singer and the dancer and the guitarist combine to achieve a new level of performance and they call that *duende*. I wondered if you

were interested in your composition, in increasing the possibility of *duende*?

Yes, absolutely. Sometimes I conduct these improvisational works, and in a sense, I am conducting spontaneously — selecting timbres from the group, you know? . . . It's one of the reasons I started using graphic notations and some degree of improvisation. I remember John Cage when he was doing his — I mean he's still doing it — chance music where he flipped coins and got sequences of things and then they were performed by a stopwatch . . . after chance had made the arrangement, the way of performing it was with a stopwatch. One minute, thirty-three seconds somebody goes 'chic-boom', forty-four seconds later an instrument goes 'blup'. I sat through a lot of concerts of chance music, my own and other people's, and I really felt that was a very cold thing, you know?

Very anti-*duende*, I should think.

And because they were organised by chance the continuity was very strange so they were in one sense very good. But they were the antithesis of what I was interested in, which is performer intensity; the relationship of one person to another . . . I wanted to give the musician a little breathing space. I guess I like that feeling of space, flexing, breathing, you know?

I would have thought that to give the performer more space and flexibility was a particularly apt thing to do since the introduction of electronic music, which actually does give a composer the chance to realise his compositions absolutely accurately. Those circumstances seem to set the performer apart in a way — release him. If you want complete discipline — accuracy, your best field would be electronics, perhaps.

But you see, most every composer who was into electronic music early — the others would have to tell you what they think — but for me I believe that we all felt the kind of coldness in this thing. And for my part I found it very boring just to sit down in the studio and cut and slip tape and combine these things. I mean I really like the society of making music with people, you know? And that's what I try and create in my scoring.

Before the end of our conversation I asked Earle Brown about a forthcoming concert of his music to be performed in Rotterdam, in which fully notated pieces and 'December '52', an almost totally improvised piece, were to be performed by the same musicians.

What sort of problems did he expect?

Well in a certain sense, I have to teach improvisation every time I do that piece with different people . . . I must teach the nature of the piece and create a mental and sonic condition for the piece. Nevertheless I believe affirmatively that improvisation is a musical art which passed out of Western usage for a time but is certainly back now. And I felt that it would come back which is why I based a lot of my work on certain aspects of it. It's here and I think it's going to stay. And it's not going to do away with the writing of music but it's going to bring an added dimension — of aliveness — to a composition and bring the musician into a greater intensity of working on that piece.